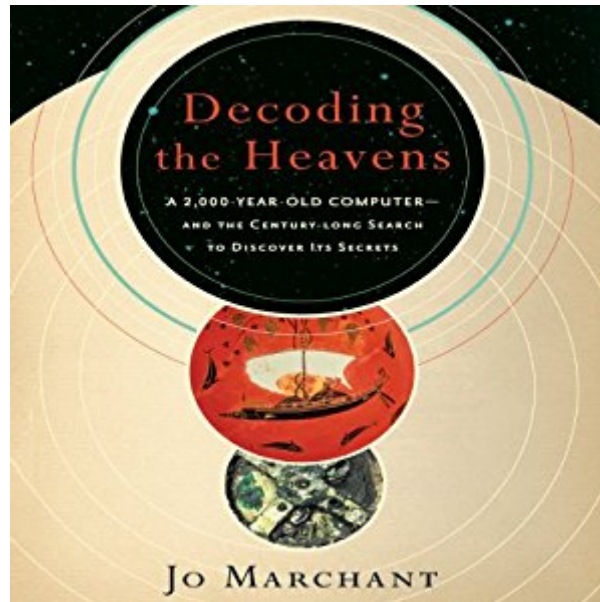




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# Decoding The Heavens



## Synopsis

In *Decoding the Heavens*, Jo Marchant tells for the first time the full story of the 100-year quest to decipher the ancient Greek computer known as the Antikythera Mechanism. Along the way she unearths a diverse cast of remarkable characters and explores the deep roots of modern technology in ancient Greece and the medieval European and Islamic worlds. At its heart, this is an epic adventure and mystery, a book that challenges our assumptions about technology through the ages.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

This book describes the search for understanding of the Antikythera mechanism. Built around 100 BC the device was so sophisticated and unique it took more than 100 yrs in the present day to understand. The book describes the search for knowledge of its operation and what it means for the understanding of Greek scientific devices. It is an exciting read. It took 1500 yrs to equal its performance and even that understates the magnitude of the effort. Arthur C Clark says if the sophistication of science in this creation had continued unimpeded to the present day we would be landing on stars instead of just the moon. The final section gives an intriguing vision of how this device changes our views on History and the talents of Greek scientists.

In 1900 an ancient shipwreck was discovered off the coast of the Greek island of Antikythera. Divers quickly brought up statues and other readily recognizable pieces, along with, almost as an afterthought, a strange lump of something metallic which at first seemed worthless. Then startled

archaeologists and scientists noticed gears and cogs and realized that something far more interesting than any statue had been uncovered. The Antikythera mechanism was to perplex and intrigue investigators throughout the twentieth century and into the twenty-first. Jo Marchant, a science writer for *Nature* and other scientific journals, has the gift of writing clearly and excitingly about subjects which might seem impenetrably obscure to laymen. *Decoding the Heavens* is her account of the long process of determining what the Antikythera Mechanism was designed to do, how it actually functioned, and who might have been its original designer. She is able to give life to the succession of highly intelligent and sometimes irascible and eccentric investigators who spent much of their lives on the Antikythera Mechanism. She is also able to explain the complexities of modern technological developments which enabled the investigators to finally unravel the secrets of the Mechanism. I really enjoyed *Decoding the Heavens*, particularly the parts in which Marchant speculates on who might have been the Mechanism's original designer. While I wish a map of the eastern Mediterranean had been included to help pinpoint Antikythera, Rhodes, Corinth, Syracuse, and the many other places mentioned in the book, I have no hesitation in recommending this book to anyone interested in the Greek and Roman world or in ancient and modern technology.

This is an excellent book about one of the most momentous discoveries made of ancient Greek civilization, the Antikythera mechanism, a device the existence of which is impossible. How is it possible that the ancient Greeks knew enough to construct an analogue computer from brass, with dozens of finely cut gear wheels, dials, spindles, and etchings, something that would not be discovered again for a thousand years? *Decoding the Heavens* chronicles the Antikythera mechanism from its discovery, to its lying deteriorating in museum storage, to someone finally realizing its significance. If you thought the ancient Greeks were all pretty statues and buildings, then this book is a real eye opener. Jo Marchant covers the modern history of the mechanism and also speculates on its ancient history, its creation and subsequent loss/saving in a shipwreck. Bronze and brass were a valuable war materiel, I wonder what other artifacts have been lost to be melted down to make the next army's weapons? If you're interested in technology, astronomy, and the ancient Greeks then you are in for a treat.

I was searching for a book on the Antikythera device after seeing it in Athens. What I was dreading was either a dry scientific report or the typical Science Channel type over-hyped garbage that constantly insinuates that such an instrument is impossible or hints at alien invention or time travel. This was neither. Marchant walks the fine line between making the reader understand the

significance of the A. device while keeping credulity under control. She does an excellent job of describing the history of the find as well as the major the protagonists with clarity and a perfect use of anecdotal reporting. Most enjoyably she also puts both the discovery, the history and scientific methods in context. All in all it was one of the better scientific summaries I have read in quite some time - good for all levels of understanding and easy to read.

This is a highly readable and comprehensive book covering the story of the antikythera mechanism from it's discovery to the date the book was published. Some of the older information has been released before in bits and pieces, such as articles in technical journals and the occasional "Nature" article, but nowhere is it all brought together and updated like this. If you have any interest in this marvelous ancient mystery you will want to read this book. On another subject, reading the details about how some scientists try to keep their research a secret, how stingy museums are with access to their artifacts, etc. is not very flattering. But I believe that's the way it is.

I bought this book because I was required to read it for a book review in my Evolutions of Modern Science class. I didn't have high hopes because most books that are required reading are dull and tedious. This book was the exact opposite. I actually thoroughly enjoyed the book. It doesn't read like a book walking you through the discovery of an old mechanism. It reads like an adventure book. I flew through this book and was actually sad when it was over. If you enjoy the history of science and technology or just enjoy a good adventure book, I highly recommend this book.

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